

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I trust that you've noticed by now that today is Advent Sunday, the beginning of the church's year, and we've heard already several classic Advent readings, which contain all the dark and disturbing things you expect to hear in the Advent season. What comes across strongly is an emphasis on the coming day, a cataclysmic day of the Lord.

It's an unsettling message. Advent is not a comfortable time. It's a time when we're invited to face up to the dark things there are in life. If we observe it properly, it's meant to be uncomfortable, to prod us. Advent forces us to look at some of the Bible's most challenging passages and some of the ideas that we'd perhaps rather not confront.

There was a famous Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral called Dean Inge, and he once went out to the West Country of England to visit one of his ex-students. On his return, he noted in his diary two things about the man he'd gone to see. Firstly, he kept lizards in his drawing room. Secondly, he had an interest in the early church's ideas about the last day. Both, to Dean Inge, seemed equally eccentric. I'm not so sure about the lizards, but maintaining an interest in the Bible's teaching about the last days is not, in my view, eccentric. Challenging, yes. Eccentric, no.

We simply can't ignore this strand of Biblical thought. It's too central, too embedded. Take today's Gospel from Mark chapter 13, sometimes called The Little Apocalypse. It appears almost verbatim in three of our four Gospels, and it's the longest part of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Mark, which is the earliest Gospel to be written. Often Mark will simply say in passing that Jesus taught without saying what he said. But here, he lays out, in great detail, Jesus' teaching about the final day, the coming day of the Lord.

And we acknowledge the centrality of this message each week as we gather for our Eucharist, which we're reminded we celebrate until he comes.

As I looked at this passage again this week, I was reminded of how many unknowns there are in this chapter. Jesus says, for instance, about the day or hour, no one knows, not the angels, not Jesus

himself, only the Father. No one knows.

This, however, has not stopped people speculating. I spent a very unedifying hour this week on the internet looking at websites called things like End Time Chronology, full of speculative nonsense as people try to fill in the gaps, try to work out what really we should know about things that Jesus says are unknown.

Now this drove me back to the Gospel reading and a desire not to focus on the unknown, not to get drawn into unhelpful speculation, but instead, to concentrate on what we do know. Because whilst it's clear there are some things, which neither we nor the angels cannot be sure, there are several things here of which we can be sure. There are several knowns. So let me pick out three of them.

We might not know the when or the how, but we do know the who that's being talked about here. It will be Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, coming in clouds with great power and glory. We don't know when, but we know who it will be riding on the clouds.

There was a man, sadly he was English, called Ernest Digweed who died in 1976. He left an estate of 26,107 pounds in trust to be paid to Jesus Christ on his second coming, and his whole estate was to be invested for 80 years. If, and I quote from his will, "During those 80 years, the Lord Jesus Christ shall come to reign on the earth, then the public trustees upon obtaining proof, which should satisfy them of his identity, shall pay to the Lord Jesus Christ, all the property, which they hold on his behalf."

Now Mr. Digweed makes certain assumptions in his will, which one might want to question, like whether money will be any use on that great day or perhaps more pertinently whether there will be any problem who it is riding on the clouds of glory when Jesus does return. I'm confident that the who will be made clear on that great day. That's one thing of which we can be sure amongst all the unknowns that there are at the moment.

The second thing we can be sure of is that there will be an end. Ends are good. Ends make sense of things. You know when you've read a great novel, if you've really enjoyed it, you want there to be a good end, and by that, I mean, you want to get to the end, to

the last page, and have everything fall into place. You want all the pennies to drop. You want to be able to say, "Oh, that's why they said this. That's why so-and-so did that." You want things to fall into place because ends make sense of things. That's what we think of as a good end when things come together. Why certain things happened along the way as they did.

Yet, we're not always comfortable with ends. Since I've been in America, I've noticed that nobody dies here. They simply pass away. It's a euphemism that feels gentler. It's less stark, but I don't think it's helpful. In my view, passing away doesn't do justice to the jarring finality of death. Those who've gone through the unexpected death of a loved one know that death doesn't feel gentle. It doesn't deserve a gentle euphemism. We should name it for what it is.

St. Paul doesn't say that passing away has lost its sting. No. Death ... Death has lost its sting. Passing away has not been swallowed up in the victory. Death has been swallowed up in victory. We can dare to name the ends for what they are because we believe that ends are also new beginnings.

In our resurrection faith, death is but the portal to an everlasting and more glorious life. And the great day of judgment, which we think about in Advent is an end, but it also marks the new beginning of a new heaven and a new earth.

When God acts to judge the world, evil will be overcome, and justice will be restored, and I take great comfort with that, that with God, nothing is unnoticed. I would find personally suffering an injustice to be completely unbearable if I felt that nobody noticed, that nobody cared. If suffering on the scale which we see in the world just simply went by unnoticed.

The Advent hope is that one glorious day, everything will be put right because God does notice, and the wrongs that we see in this world will be righted, and justice will be restored when that new kingdom begins. So our uncomfortable Advent message contains seeds of hope.

Thirdly, the passage is very clear that we're to stay alert, to keep watch. It ends with a simple instruction, "Keep awake." We're to live this life mindful of the

fact that another world, another kingdom is close by. Advent is there to make us feel uncomfortable, to stop us getting too comfortable in this physical, material world in which we live. It does that because it's a reminder that this world is not all that there is. There's another reality, out of sight, but still close by.

As C.S. Lewis said, "It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world, they've become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven, and you'll get earth thrown in. Aim at earth, and you'll get neither." We're to live in the shadow of eternity, looking for signs of God's presence in the world. We're to wake up, be alert to the nearness of God's kingdom.

As Elizabeth Barrett Browning said, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush, afire with God, and only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit around and pluck blackberries." Our call is to be the ones that notice, that take off our shoes in the presence of the Holy God who is close by, who will be fully revealed on that great day.

Advent is a time to look and see, to be alert, to watch. To watch, as Cardinal Newman said, is to be detached from what is present and to live in what is unseen.

So this Advent season, let's wake up from our materialist slumber. Wake up to the reality of God's presence and His kingdom. Let's not forget that another day is coming. Let's watch for the signs of God's kingdom, and let's pray this Advent prayer with Robert Hurhold: "Come Lord Jesus, come quickly. We do not understand what this means, but don't let that stop you. "

Amen.